

The Liberation of Prudence Johnson

By PHILIP ARTHUR SEXSMITH

Helen ran through the halls unaware of the nurses who ordered her to stop. The antiseptic smell panicked her. Her heart was cold. She looked frantically into each room, searching for a familiar body. Helen had a horrible fear that Prudence might be dead. Then Helen stopped running. She did not know why. Crossed legs. She thought quickly. The Summer at Lake Winona, Girl Guides, the pup-tent, that snake. "Prude", she breathed and turned about at once.

Helen was relieved to see Prudence's left arm. She had visions of it dangling from a tree all afternoon. It was such a relief to see Prudence intact. A desperate gurgle and wheeze turned Helen's thought from Prudence to the grey curtain that hung quietly at the other end of the room. The sound stopped. She turned back to Prudence.

"Prudence, Prudence," she gently called. "It's me, Helen Brewer from 37D."

"No," Prudence whispered semi-consciously. "no, no, no."

"Prudence, please speak to me."

"No, no, no," Prudence murmured. "Chickens, chickens, no, no, no."

"Prude, what happened to you? What have these chickens done to you?" Helen gently raised Prudence's head from her pillow. She smoothed out the wrinkles on the case. "Oh Prudence," she sighed. Helen was sincerely sorry. This was all her fault and she knew it. She remembered that it was only a few weeks ago when Prudence decided she wanted to go back to Tom. Yet, she helped Godonza convince her to stay. She felt so responsible.

"Chicken . . . Prudence repeated, rolling her head from side to side. "Chickens . . ."

The mysterious gurgling continued.

"Damn chickens, damn chickens," Prudence whimpered.

Helen stroked her friends hair. She gasped as several feathers stuck to her hand.

"Peck, peck, peck," said Prudence, gouging the mattress with her nails.

"Oh God," Helen gasped, "Prudence, you've been pecked!"

Helen covered her mouth with her hands. She gagged on another handful of feathers.

Helen took Prudence's hand tightly into her own. "Will you ever be able to forgive me Prudence? I've been so selfish. Satan stole my heart, but I should never have been so insensitive to you. I should have spent more time with you. Now look what's happened. How can I ever forgive myself?"

Helen stood solemnly, and then walked to the window beside Prudence's bed. "Oh God, how could you?" She saw herself in the tinted glass. Beyond her own image lay the city. "Why is it that when a person as good as Prudence Johnson finally gets to see herself, you strike her down. Why?" Helen shrugged her shoulders and tossed back her head. "For Pete's sake we're not Jewish. We're from Iowa. Can't you see Lord, we're on your side." The gurgling began again. "Wasn't it you who talked about the good samaritan? I know it

was, I remember. Back in Trenton, Reverend Black told us all to be good samaritans. Just like in the story." Helen leaned reflectively

against the wall. "Remember how the old man got mugged in the desert. The robbers took everything but his Ass. People saw what happened but they didn't want to get involved. They left him to die. Well, pretty soon, someone good guy came along. He helped the destitute man. I mean, that's what it's all about, helping each other, isn't it? Then why do I feel so guilty?" Helen turned to look at Prudence briefly. "I feel guilty because I'm responsible for what's happened to Prudence. Oh Lord, I'm the mugger, Prudence is the destitute sole. Prudence is so lost that she probably couldn't find her Ass if I pointed at it." Helen began to cry. Out of fear, frustration, and a deep seated love for her injured friend. "I don't understand it Lord, you sent Hitler to Brazil, Napoleon to Elba, Hess to Argentina, but you cast Prudence to the chickens. I don't understand it. How could you allow her to be pecked so cruelly?" The distant gurgling turned into a mechanical blurrp. The wheezing was rhythmic. Helen looked down at Prudence. She lay as still as death. Helen could feel tears on her cheeks. "Lord, both Satan and I want you to know, that in the morning we're both turning in our Rex Humbard Prayer Keys."

"Oh Tom," cried Prudence, "Tom, where am I?"

"You're here Prudence, with me," Helen knelt beside her friend.

"Helen, Helen, where are you? Helen please, turn on the lights."

"Prudence, it's daylight."

There was a long silence as Prudence tried to regain her composure. In the past Prudence had always prided herself on facing a crisis with dignity. Yet pictures of dogs and little girls selling pencils sent her quickly into a hysterical frenzy. "Helen!" she screamed. "Call highway patrol, find me a donor. I'm blind. I can't eat with my hands, I'm blind. I'll starve Helen, I'll starve. Get me a blender, maybe some straws. Oh Helen, there's so much to do. Oh Helen I'm blind. This sin and lust has made me blind."

Helen removed the bandages from Prudence's eyes.

"There," smiled Helen, "isn't that better?"

Prudence blushed. The gurgling began again.

Helen quietly folded the bandage and placed it on the nightstand beside the bed. "Prudence, you still haven't told me how you got here."

"Did the nurse tell you anything?" Prudence asked.

"Only that you were in the hospital," replied Helen. "Was it an accident?"

"No, it wasn't." Prudence was startlingly serious.

"Well then what happened?" Helen sat attentively on the side of the bed.

"Somebody tried to kill me today." Prudence looked deep into her friends eyes.

"That's crazy Prudence, who would want to hurt you. No one even knows you're in Smut-City. Just Satan, Godonza and me."

"I don't care Helen, what happened today was not a mere accident. It had to be deliberate."

"Be specific Prudence, tell me about it."

Prudence sighed. "I went to the market this morning, like I have been every Saturday morning since I came to this town. I was standing at Mrs. Bloom's Fruit Stand, squeezing her avacados when out of no where came this Chicken Truck. It veered off of the road and was heading straight for the Fruit Stand. If I hadn't managed to throw Mrs. Bloom in front of me, Lord only knows what might of happened. It was just awful. When the truck hit Mrs. Bloom the sky exploded with thousands of furious chickens. It was a nightmare. I can still feel their rough little beaks all over my body."

"Is Mrs. Bloom alright?" Helen asked.

"She's over there, behind the curtain," Prudence gestured across the room. The gurgling and wheezing grew louder.

"Poor dear," Helen sighed.

"It's going to be a tricky operation from what the ambulance driver told me," Prudence spoke softly.

"Oh no, really?" asked Helen.

"Yes, I guess they have to extract a breast from Mrs. Bloom's throat." Prudence shook her head sadly.

"How odd," Helen replied.

"Ambulance attendant says it's the first case he has ever seen," said Prudence.

"Was it a case of genetic phenomenon?" asked Helen.

"No," replied Prudence, "it was a Rhode Island Red from what I could see. Quite a battle. Looks like they're both paying for it now. Pity."

"Yes, it is sad," Helen added, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

"You see Helen, once the truck hit us thousands of angry chickens where out for blood. We had to fight with what we had. I used my purse, Mrs. Bloom used her teeth."

Prudence wiped the beads of perspiration from her forehead.

"Her teeth?" Helen asked in disbelief.

"Well all she had was her white purse. From what I gathered it was her only one. Besides it is Summer and you have to think ahead."

Helen was beginning to make some sense out of the whole picture.

"I don't know Prudence, it seems so barbaric to bite a chicken," Helen crinkled her nose in distaste.

"I wonder if you'd say that while you were on the other end of the beak?" Prudence spoke prophetically. "I just wish Mrs. Bloom's Fruit Stand could have with stood the attack."

"Oh no," frowned Helen.

"I'm afraid her avacados will never be the same." Prudence shook her head sadly.

"Prudence, did you recognize the men who were in the truck?" asked Helen.

"No, I didn't. There just wasn't time to look." Prudence brought her fist down hard upon her thigh.

"Why couldn't I have been born a blonde? I mean you never hear about blondes getting hit by Chicken Trucks. Sure, maybe the odd Dirty Blonde, or Cherr Blonde, but how many blondes are really thrown in it?" Prudence turned her eyes to the ceiling. "Of course, being blonde might mean

that I was Swedish. I wouldn't want that. I couldn't be anything but an Iowa girl. Besides, I hate meatballs and smorgasboards."

"Could it be Godonza?" Helen asked with a toss of her platinum blonde hair.

"I doubt if his feet would even touch the peddles. But, whoever it was, I'll lay odds that it's the same person who's been making those obscene phone calls to me all week."

"Prudence, why didn't you tell me that you have been getting threatening calls?"

"Well," replied Prudence, "I thought it might have been Uncle Roy and you know how he is. Besides, it wasn't worth the worry."

"Don't you have any clues at all?" asked Helen.

"The license-plate number," Prudence quickly sat-up straight in bed.

"You couldn't get a better clue Prudence," said Helen who was digging in her purse for a pen.

"Well go on, what is it?"

"I don't know," replied Prudence.

"Then why did you tell me you knew the number?" asked Helen.

"I didn't say that I had the number Helen, I meant that I knew where we could get that number."

Prudence smiled. "Mrs. Bloom has got to have that number imprinted on her backside deeper than the Grand Canyon."

"That's insane Prudence," Helen was getting impatient.

"That's where she got hit Helen, I saw it. And believe me, at the speed that truck was going, even Mrs. Bloom's hide couldn't go unmarked." Prudence grinned widely.

"Well then we'll have to look," said Helen.

Prudence leaned back against her pillow and announced she felt too weak. Helen shoved a pen and paper-pad into her hand.

"Here's the pen and paper, now I'll yell out the numbers, and you copy them down." Helen walked over to the ominous grey curtains.

She stopped, in sudden disbelief of what she was about to do.

Prudence saw her friend hesitate, she broke into a chorus of "Nearer My God to Thee". Helen disappeared behind the sheet of greyness.

The moment that Helen disappeared from Prudence's sight, she heard the gurgling and wheezing sounds increase in strength. Mrs. Bloom was aware of Helen's presence.

"Good afternoon Mrs. Bloom, it's me, Helen Brewer. Remember me, I'm the Java Orange freak."

The gurgling increased in pitch. "Good, good Mrs. Bloom," Helen replied.

"Are you getting the numbers?" Prudence yelled towards the curtain.

"Patience Prudence, the broad weighs a quarter ton as it is." There were several sharp wheezes. "Now Mrs. Bloom; can I call you Hilda?" Another wheeze.

"Good then, Hilda. Now I'm not at all sure if you can hear me or not, but I've got to roll you on your side, you're sitting on something I want." The gurgles turned into erratic sputters amidst the grunting sounds of Helen's labour.

"Come on Hilda, let's do it for the Furher, I swear that what ever I see it will be a secret between

you, me and Mr. Bloom. Now heave." Helen shouted slightly, and then exhaled with relief. Mrs. Bloom was on her side.

"Do you have the number yet Helen?" Prudence yelled.

"In a minute," Helen replied.

The gurgling and wheezing of Mrs. Bloom slowly died off. "Mrs. Bloom, . . . Hilda?" whispered Helen.

"Helen," yelled Prudence impatiently, "the woman is in a coma she can't answer you." Prudence then saw the curtain jerk wildly. She saw the form of Helen's body imprinted quickly in several different places on the curtain. The movement was panicked.

"Helen, what's happening over there?"

"I think Hilda's stopped breathing!" Helen yelled back.

"Well do something Helen," Prudence demanded.

"Oh my God I've unplugged her," Helen screamed.

"Well plug her back in!" Prudence ordered. Helen scrambled about with the cord.

"Have you got it in yet Helen?" asked Prudence.

"Yes," Helen sighed, "she's breathing again." Four sharp wheezes split the silence of the room.

"Wonderful," said Prudence, "now get the number. Hurry before the nurse comes." Prudence licked the tip of her pen and wrote the word KILLERS at the top of the page.

"7-5-2-6-A-L-1," Helen listed slowly.

"State," asked Prudence.

"Terrible," replied Helen, "this woman has had a very hard life Prudence."

"Not condition you fool, state, as in Maine." Prudence could feel her eye twitch in rhythm with the wheezing and gurgling of Mrs. Bloom.

"The state is Texasss," Helen drawled.

"Got it," shouted Prudence, "now roll the old lady on her back and get out of there."

No sooner had Helen reached Prudence when a voice bellowed loud from the door.

"You are not allowed in here." She was deep voiced. A mountain of pure white cotton. Face like an orange. Sterile.

"I'll go," Helen grinned at the nurse. She then turned to Prudence and smiled. "Look, once you get out of this place you're coming to live at the garage with Satan and me."

"Helen," Prudence smiled, "that's so sweet, but it's too much of an imposition for you and Satan. You'd have to ask Satan to move his chopper out of the guest-room and everything. No, I'll stay alone."

"We'll see." Helen took her friends hand.

"Miss," warned the nurse.

"Take-care Prudence, I'll drop by tonight." Helen walked to the door.

"I will Helen," said Prudence. "Thanks for being there when I needed you."

"I always will be. Bye". She disappeared into the hall. The nurse wheeled in a small wagon and stopped it by Prudence's bed.

"Your lunch Mrs. Brewer." She lifted the cover off of the plate.

"Corn, carrots, beans, potatoes, . . .

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